READING LIFE WRITING: AN ANTHOLOGY

Marlene Kadar, ed.. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993

by Miriam Jones

With regards to *Reading Life Writing,* the parts, though individually moving, are not greater than the whole: for with them, Marlene Kadar builds a argument for the expansion of the definition of the genre of "life writing." The texts are grouped under sub-genres as examples which exemplify, as well as strain against, definitions. Throughout, Kadar relates her commentary and her selections to feminist theory and practice: indeed, she writes that the collection "has always been considered a feminist project."

The texts are balanced between the expected canonical choices, such as Augustine, Samuel Pepys and Virginia Woolf—choices which establish generic parameters—and texts from more marginalized traditions which question those parameters. The collection goes beyond the conventional notions of biography, memoirs and letters to include what she terms "blended genres" categories such as "fictionalized letters." To those who assume that life writing is distinct from fiction inasmuch as it transparently attempts to evoke someone's lived experience, it may startle to find included texts such as Defoe's *Moll Flanders.* But part of Kadar's stated project is "to probe the assumption that autobiographical documents are 'true,'" and to reflect on modes of reading. She writes that the Life Writing project is the construction of the self, which indicates that the definition of the genre should include any conflation of literature and life. As well as playing with autobiographical formulae in his novels, Kadar tells us that Defoe was something of a picaro himself. He is the literary subject as well as the author and narrator. Metafictional writing, then, can be read as life writing because it abolishes distance between narrator and author. Indeed, Kadar asks if we cannot read all writing as life writing? Initially a daunting question, this possibility becomes more feasible as one moves through the anthology, and one of the reasons is the deftness of the choices. In the notion of a genre-across-genres, some readers may fear a lack of critical focus. But this collection, as a totality, points to elements in each of the texts that would not have been readily apparent had they been read in more conventional generic contexts.

Life writing, potentially subversive of genre itself, is an appropriate form for the intersection of the political with private life. Slaves, women, dissidents, and others living under scrutiny and without access to publishing have at least had access to personal writing. With many of the writers represented, writing about their own lives comes to be indivisible from writing about their community: Kadar refers to Françoise Lionnet's term "autoethnography" to indicate this reclamation of heritage. As Shmuel Goldman, whom Barbara Myerhoff interviewed for her text *Number Our Days,* says:

> Now there are some people...who you will hear say, Jewish is not a real language....Nonsense. Jewish we call the mama-loshen. That means more than mother tongue. It is the *mother's* tongue because this was the language the mother talked, sweet or bitter. It was your own...it had words in it that could be used differently for the inside sweet world and the hard world outside.

Goldman speaks of loss and devaluation as well as of self-protection and belonging. Myerhoff, an anthropologist, chose her subject for personal reasons: her dead grandparents had never told her about the shtetl. This life, then, while ostensibly Goldman's, is also obliquely her own.

Many of the selections indicate the circituitous routes to power women have been obliged to take. Even as relatively privileged a woman as Virginia Woolf uses the homely form of the letter in order to present theory in *Three Guineas.* Politics are in effect syphoned into a "safe" form, as in the case of Sor Juana de la Cruz, the 17th-century Mexican nun who defends her right to education to the Bishop of Puebla in a carefully-worded letter: "The first...[obstacle to responding] has been not knowing how to reply to your most learned, prudent, pious, and loving letter," she begins.

One of the most persuasive arguments about women's use of life writing as a form of personal and political self-expression arises, paradoxically, from the number of fiction writers and poets who recreate life writing genres in their texts—such as Beatrice Culleton in her novel *In Search of April Raintree,* where a Native girl who commits suicide is given a voice when her journal is interpolated into the narrative. Kadar comments on our lack of knowledge about women's lives, and her project is a kind of reclamation in the tradition of feminist scholarship, as much as are some of the texts from which she draws. With reference to medieval mystic Margery Kempe she writes that the theme of needing to find meaning, though often opaque, is repeated throughout. It is in the construction of the self in the light of this notion that one of the major interests of the collection lies. Or perhaps more simply, it comes down to Shmuel Goldman's *mama-loshen* in the face of the "the hard world outside."

ROMANTIC CORRESPONDENCE: WOMEN, POLITICS AND THE FICTION OF LETTERS

Mary A. Favret. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 268 pp.

by Katherine Binhammer

Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female—Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

As Jane Austen's comment underscores, the genre of letter writing has frequently been identified as a female form. Many texts by feminists and literary historians have explored and analyzed the relationship between the epistolary form and